Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Interlock: The Essential Mark Lombardi

Patricia Goldstone · Thursday, October 20th, 2016

Before Edward Snowden, before Julian Assange, and long before an international consortium of 400 journalists broke the story of an 11-million tax-scam document leak they called the Panama Papers, there was Mark Lombardi, a lone conceptual artist who drew a continual visual history of the offshore banking business before he was found hanged in his 300 square-foot Williamsburg studio at the age of 49. The Panama Papers are only a part of the alternative world economy Lombardi mapped in a monumental series of elegant visual narratives detailing marriages of convenience between intelligence agencies, governments, corporations (i.e. banks) and organized crime from the 1930s to the year 2000, when he died. Connecting his drawings to form a 360-degreee panorama, he described the evolution of a single network which has consumed the financial ecology over time in a series of related bubbles, one of which predicts the next. Because he meticulously used both legal and mathematical tools to compose his drawings—with principles of proportional beauty he appropriated from Leonardo Da Vinci – Lombardi straddles the cusp between art and information, the first artist to "do metadata". He is certainly the first artist to be studied in depth by the intelligence agencies he scrutinized in his work, and whose legacy is a financial fraud investigation platform, created by Peter "PayPal" Thiel with venture capital from the CIA. In the computer science world, he is hailed as a pioneer in social network analysis and the process of creating visual narrative—all a remarkable achievement for a working-class Italian-American guy armed with nothing more than a bachelor's degree in fine arts and the naked ambition to be a great artist. Lombardi once wrily remarked that "You can hang the truth on a wall for everyone to see, and no one will give much of a damn." When his work can be used to make sense of current events ranging from the Great Recession of 2008 to the bizarre Presidential campaign of 2016, it's high time that people did.

Excerpt from
INTERLOCK
By PATRICIA GOLDSTONE

The Essential Mark Lombardi

"Every exhibition is a well-baited trap."
—Mark Lombardi

Just after midnight on March 22, 2000, police crawled through the transom of the studio belonging

to a 48-year-old conceptual artist in Brooklyn. The police discovered the artist, Mark Lombardi, neatly dressed in a dark-blue shirt and matching pants and socks, hanging from a noose slung over one of his sprinkler pipes with an open bottle of champagne suspended from a string beside him. A full bottle of Tylenol PM was in his shirt pocket, a half-smoked joint on his nightstand. According to the medical examiner's report, several hundred Tylenols littered the floor. Oddly, the police report, filled out at the scene prior to the medical examiner's arrival, did not note the unusual display. Again oddly, standard procedure to establish time of death was not followed at the scene, but the medical examiner estimated from the distension and slight discoloration of Lombardi's abdomen that he had been dead at least 24 hours. Neither the police nor medical examiner's report indicates that drugs or alcohol played any role in Lombardi's death. An autopsy, performed the next day, noted levels of Tylenol, alcohol, and marijuana in his body despite the fact that, if he had indeed been dead for more than 24 hours, the active ingredients in both Tylenol and alcohol would have metabolized out of his body. For habitual marijuana users like Lombardi, testing can detect traces of THC, the most active chemical in cannabis, in the body for up to a week after use.

From Lombardi's girlfriend, Hilary Maslon, who had called the police five minutes before midnight to say she hadn't been able to reach him for a week and feared he was deeply depressed over the state of their relationship, the detectives of the 90th Precinct in Williamsburg deduced that the artist showed all the classic earmarks of a suicide—"above-average intelligence combined with fear of success." Maslon, an aspiring fellow artist and heiress to a fortune dependent on one of the commodities conglomerates whose activities are depicted in Lombardi's investigative artworks, neglected to inform them that his elegant drawings, which were becoming not only highly successful but highly visible to the public eye, were art as information, investigating the interconnections of the global money-laundering business.

By a curious coincidence, only days before, *Intelligence Newsletter*, a tiny publication with a sharp focus on the intelligence community, had reported that George W. Bush's presidential campaign could run into trouble over the candidate's association with Khalid bin Mahfouz, banker to the Saudi royal family. Bin Mahfouz, a Saudi national, was under investigation by American authorities for surreptitiously funding a terrorist organization called al-Qaeda through his charitable foundations. He had also had extensive though indirect dealings with Bush during his oil days through Texas middleman James Bath, a subject Lombardi treated extensively in his drawing series on Bush's oil company, Harken Energy. Bin Mahfouz was only one focus among many hundreds of others in Lombardi's increasingly celebrated drawings, some well-known, some obscure, dating back to the Nixonian heyday of illegal campaign finance and forward to the administration of William Jefferson Clinton.

Curiously, the police did not examine Lombardi's work, merely noting from the large number of drawings in his studio that the deceased "appears" to have been an artist. Curious, because the FBI was fully aware of Lombardi's art. Shortly after 9/11, FBI agents showed up at the Whitney Museum of American Art to examine his masterwork on the subject of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI) and asked to remove it (the museum refused). Lombardi's mother, Shirley, said, "It has always bothered me, just exactly how the FBI knew it was there." In October 2001, when the artist had a memorial show at the Drawing Center in New York, the show was closed on opening night by nameless security officials. Five months later, the FBI's Operation Green Quest, which came into being in the fall of 2001, raided the offices of several Virginia-based Islamic charities whose Saudi funders, including bin Mahfouz as well as other Bush backers, were highlighted in Lombardi's work. Ironically, the FBI had been examining the wrong drawing. The information it sought was prominently displayed in Lombardi's Harken Energy drawing, which had by that time been spirited away by a fellow artist to a private collection in Germany.

Nonetheless, after a perfunctory investigation lasting two days that consisted of brief interviews

with Maslon and Lombardi's parents, the Williamsburg police declared the death a suicide. The studio door, securely locked from the inside, showed no signs of forced entry except for the transom the police had opened themselves. Lombardi's body was not marked by struggle, and the hasty autopsy determined that his injuries were consonant with having hanged himself. Although there were substantial differences between Maslon's account and that of Shirley Lombardi, who said her son told her just two days before he died that he was jubilant both about his rising success and the prospect of moving in with Maslon, that did not convince the police to keep the investigation open, even though it is standard procedure to do so when witnesses offer significantly different testimony.

Staunch Catholics to whom the idea of suicide is anathema, the Lombardis questioned the perfunctory investigation but felt they were being stonewalled. It took "forever" to get the artist's body back, according to Shirley, who was most emotionally involved. When they did, it had been cremated and all forensic evidence destroyed. The family, led by Don Lombardi, did not press for further investigation. Shirley Lombardi died, still broken-hearted, in 2012, but even today the smallest detail about Mark's death stirs up a Rashomon of conflicting stories among family members as well as lovers, colleagues, and the police records, which state that the bottle of "champagne" so vividly remembered among some of his friends as a romantic gesture to Maslon was really only white wine. In fact, one of his closest friends says that only days before Lombardi's death the artist, far from being despondent about breaking up with Maslon, told him jubilantly that his recent successes put him in the market for a better-looking girlfriend.

The controversy might have perversely tickled Lombardi himself, a consummate showman as well as artist, whose business card read DEATH DEFYING ACTS OF ART AND CONSPIRACY. Over the years, Lombardi's death has transformed itself into the ultimate piece of Conceptual Art. He was fond of remarking to the younger artists he mentored that every exhibition is a well-baited trap, that by the time a show is ready to be seen, the artist must have already stirred so much buzz among his dealers, critics, and other connections in the art world that its success is a fait accompli. As his prices, boosted by the frisson of a murder-mystery, have since soared to a quarter-million dollars for one of the larger drawings (an astronomical sum for works on paper), it is easy to imagine him chuckling somewhere in the afterlife in his characteristic cigarette rasp not only at the length of the list of the people who might want to kill him but at their celebrity—the Vatican, the Mafia, the Bushes, the CIA! At the top of the list, there are dozens of web pages devoted to anti-Bush conspiracy theories spun round the fact that Lombardi joined J.H. Hatfield, Daniel Casolaro, and Gary Webb as the fourth suspicious suicide by a Bush family researcher. (In fact, the perfunctory police investigation into Lombardi's death bears more than a passing resemblance to that meted out to Casolaro's, which was later the subject of a Senate inquiry.)

Journalists like Russ Baker, Joseph Trento, and Pete Brewton have lived to publish their more-or-less scathing Bush family exposés (though not in election years). But if he was not murdered, what still mystifies many of those who knew Mark Lombardi well is why an artist of his overwhelming ambition would kill himself just as he was tasting the fruits of the success he longed for above all else.

After years of struggle (*New York Times* critic Roberta Smith affectionately called him the "oldest emerging artist in New York"), by 2000 Lombardi had finally arrived, overcoming an inherent prejudice against works on paper with a sensational new form of Pop Conceptualism his new admirers described as "high-end tabloid." His intricate, spider-web traceries of global flows of "hot money" from the 1950s heyday of both the American Mafia and the Cold War to the corrosive international bank scandals of the 1990s were selling like hotcakes—particularly to the newly minted moguls of the hedge-fund business. What was perhaps of interest to financial cognoscenti was how Lombardi's work graphically depicted the global commingling of two very different

definitions of hot money:

Hot money: 1) Stolen money that can be traced back to the scene of a crime. 2) In the study of economics, funds that flow into a country to take advantage of a favorable interest rate and obtain higher return; a perfectly legitimate investment vehicle.

Though like most artists he had plenty of characteristics that might qualify as psychopathology to the unimaginative, Lombardi was, above all, a cunning player of the art game—so intensely competitive that some of the younger artists he mentored say he cultivated them because he couldn't tolerate making friends in his peer group. He is remembered, in the hothouse environs of Williamsburg both as a Cheshire Cat who liked to hide his true intentions behind a highly articulate, almost self-parodying scrim of theory that served both as a subtle form of salesmanship and as a joke on an art establishment whose pretensions often infuriated him, and as a natural-born hustler who loved the hothouse and thrived in it despite its pressures. Lanky, athletic and attractively demented-looking, with an intensity that made his eyes pop behind his thick, black Roy Orbison glasses, he was single-mindedly focused on making his late, great idea pay off. The notion that he might kill himself for love makes some of his male (and female) friends snort with derision.

Lombardi had a rich and messy personal life. He was a chronic commitment-phobe with one failed marriage and one tragic love affair in his emotional baggage. His schizophrenic approach to love was aggravated by his obsessive work habits and expressed in his predilection for chasing the young girlfriends of his protégés, who charitably describe him as "an old artist playing a young artist game." He would cut himself off from the outside world for days at a time in the small, grim studio he called "The Bunker," whiting out street noise by tuning his radio to static while he worked to the point of mania and then fall into the deep depressions induced by sleep deprivation and a racing mind that he could only still with copious intakes of booze and marijuana. His alleged suicide occurred a month after such a binge, occasioned by a flood in his studio which partially destroyed his "ur-drawing" of the spook bank BCCI just as he was finishing it in time for a museum show that was to be a major breakthrough in his career.

For a potential suicide, Lombardi had an extraordinarily robust sense of humor. In fact, he was an imp—exuberant, funny, mischievous, and gregarious when not working, with a toothy grin and an endearing habit of blinking rapidly while he spoke, like an urchin telling an enormous whopper. His mother liked to recall the time he trailed an entire ball of string through an art exhibition to see if he could get away with it, and the prank is a good standing metaphor for his Conceptual work.

When he was asked, as he often was, whether he feared getting a bullet in the back of his head one day because of the sensational criminal networks he documented, he would reply with apparent seriousness that he took all of his research from previously published (and legally vetted) material and could therefore put it up on a gallery or museum wall without fear of reprisal. The art world has bought this myth uncritically to the present day, but startling new evidence makes it clear that Lombardi hoarded precisely the kind of unpublished documentation that a private investigator or investigative reporter would use in his research: He acquired much of this primary documentation through his relationship with Sissy Farenthold, one of the most politically powerful women in Texas, who launched his extraordinary late-blooming artistic success on the wings of her own political furies. In what must be one of the strangest creation-stories in art history, the former Democratic Texas House representative and one time vice presidential candidate engaged the then-struggling artist to map covert financial activities that, conveniently, included those of her political adversaries.

Through Farenthold's introductions the artist obtained copies of a highly controversial 1976 trust agreement between James R. Bath, an aviation broker who functioned as the Bush family's interface with Saudi business interests in America, and Salem bin Laden, Osama's older brother, a businessman who died in a freak light plane accident in San Antonio in 1988. These records would

have been cause for concern in Bush campaign headquarters in a closely contested election year. Ironically, the son of the enormously influential Democratic Senator Lloyd Bentsen, who with President George Herbert Walker Bush was one of the two most powerful politicians to come out of Texas, was Jim Bath's business partner, thus creating equal-opportunity image anxiety.

Lombardi was emerging not only as an extraordinary artistic talent, but also, potentially, as a high-profile threat. At least six months before his death and around the time that the Whitney Museum began considering the purchase of his major work for exhibition, he was making his research available to people in positions to bring indictments and prosecute corruption worldwide.

Image: Mark Lombardi's "George W. Bush, Harken Energy and Jackson Stephens, ca 1979–90"

This entry was posted on Thursday, October 20th, 2016 at 12:25 am and is filed under Fiction, Visual Art
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.